



Experiences of Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Fraternity and Sorority Members

By Douglas N. Case

This chapter summarizes the findings of two research initiatives with which the author was involved. The first was an informal study, conducted by the author, which consisted of surveys completed between 1992 and 1995 by over 500 self-identified gay, lesbian and bisexual (LGB) individuals who were undergraduate and alumni members of social fraternities and sororities. A summary of the results of this study were first published in a narrative article in AFA's *Perspectives* in April/May 1996; hence, this study will be referred to herein as the "1996 study." A more detailed quantitative analysis of the data was published in the August 2005 issue of *Oracle*, AFA's research journal. The second study was a more formal research project conducted under the auspices of the Lambda 10 Project by Dr. Susan R. Rankin (lead researcher), Shane L. Windmeyer, Dr. Charles G. Eberly, Dr. Grahaeme A. Hesp, George Miller, Dr. William Molasso and the author. This survey, which replicated many of the questions of the 1996 study, consisted of surveys completed in 2006-7 by 440 LGB fraternity and sorority undergraduate and alumni members. The results were published in 2007 monograph by the Lambda 10 Project, and this research project will be referred to herein as the "2007 study."

Both surveys were open to any LGB fraternity/sorority member interested in completing the survey, and were promoted in a variety of ways including the Internet, publications, news releases, fraternal and higher education organizations and word of mouth. The self-selected respondents of both studies represented a good cross-section of ages and regions of the country. Most of the participants, however, were men (about 90% in the 1996 study – which began as a study of males and was expanded midway to include females – and 80% in the 2007 study), and almost 75% in the 2007 study were white (the 1996 study did not ask for race or ethnicity).

The 1996 study attempted to develop an estimate of the percentage of fraternity and sorority members who are LGB. This is complicated by several factors: (1) many students are still developing their sexual identity while in college, (2) a substantial percentage do not reveal their sexual orientation to fellow members, (3) the fluidity of sexual identity of college-aged students, and (4) differing criteria for classifying an individual as LGB. The author asked participants how many fellow chapter members they knew with certainty to be LGB based on reliable knowledge acquired during or after college, excluding those who they merely suspected to be LGB. The study found that the

average percentage *known with certainty* by the participants to be LGB was about 5-6% for fraternities and 3-4% for sororities. Because of the factors stated above, the actual percentage is undoubtedly higher. Most likely, the percentage of LGB students in fraternities and sororities is close to that of the campus as a whole.

Both studies found that the primary reasons that LGB members joined fraternities and sororities were similar to those one might expect of non-LGB members: friendship and camaraderie, having a support group and a sense of belonging, social activities, and leadership opportunities. Only a negligible number joined to meet members of the same or opposite gender to pursue sexual relationships.

An interesting finding of both studies was that the respondents tended to gravitate toward leadership positions. For example, about a quarter of the respondents in both studies had served as chapter president. About a third of the respondents in the 2007 study had been a member of a Greek governing board (IFC, Panhellenic, NPHC, Multicultural Greek Council, etc.) and about a third had held an elected student government position. While this over-representation in leadership positions might be partially due to student leaders having a greater awareness of the survey and/or greater interest in participating, this trend toward “overachievement” may reflect a desire for validation and acceptance by the group.

The most significant findings of the 2007 study relate to the changes that have occurred in the past couple of decades with regard to the age when the participants self-identified as LGB, the age at which they “came out” to others, the degree to which they were “out” in college, and the level of acceptance within their organizations. To analyze this, the male participants were aggregated into three segments: those who joined before 1990, those who joined during the 1990s, and those who joined after 2000. (The sample sizes of the female participants precluded a valid generational analysis.)

For the 2000s cohort, over three-fourths self-identified as gay or bisexual at the time they were initiated and another 15% were questioning their sexual orientation. By contrast, of those in the pre-2000s cohorts, only about a quarter self-identified as gay or bisexual at the time they were initiated, although about 40% were questioning their sexual orientation. This is consistent with contemporary research on LGB youth. Dr. Ritch C. Savin-Williams, Chair of the Department of Human Development at Cornell University observes in his book *The New Gay Teenager* (p. 163): “The age at which individuals first identify as gay appears to be considerably younger among today’s generation of young people than among previous cohorts. It has decreased by at least five years (more for females) from those growing up in the 1960s and 1970s. From age twenty-one to sixteen is a large and meaningful decrease: from the end of college or the first years in the workplace to sophomore year in high school, from living out of the family home to living in the home.”

Another dramatic generational difference was the age when the male participants “came out” to fellow members. For the 2000s cohort, 26% were already “out” when they went through rush/recruitment, but only 2% of the pre-2000 cohorts were “out” when they joined. At the time they graduated from college, about three-fourths of the 2000s cohort

were “out” to fellow members, but only one-third of the 1990s cohort and less than a quarter of the pre-1990s cohort had “come out” to any other chapter members prior to graduation.

The early ages of LGT self-identification and “coming out” has transformed the climate on campus and within the fraternal community. For example, in the 2000s cohort, almost two-thirds rated the LGB climate in their chapter as friendly or somewhat friendly, but only about a third of the 1990s cohort and only 7% of the pre-1990s cohort reported a relatively friendly climate. The data indicated significant regional differences with regard to chapter climate, with the Northwest being the most accepting and the Southeast being most homophobic.

About half of the 2000s cohort felt they were able to bring a same-sex date to a fraternity function if they wanted to; only 15% of the 1990s cohort and 4% of the pre-1990s cohort felt that would have been able to do so. About 60% of the 2000s cohort said they would be able to invite “out” students to recruitment events; only about 25% of the 1990s cohort and less than 10% of the pre-1990s cohort felt that they would have been able to do so.

It is possible that the self-selected nature of the surveys respondents may have skewed the results in a positive direction. “Closeted” fraternity and sorority members and those who have chosen to longer be involved with their organizations may have been less likely to have learned of the survey through Lambda 10’s outreach and/or less inclined to take the initiative to complete the survey. Nonetheless, the trends indicated above are remarkable.

Although the data shows encouraging trends toward a more accepting fraternal community, almost a fourth of current LGB undergraduates reported that they had been the victims of harassment due to their sexual orientation, most frequently derogatory remarks and direct or indirect verbal harassment. The most common source of harassment (60%) was another member of their chapter.

The 2007 study asked participants who were out and open to their chapter what expectations were communicated to them, e.g., whether they could bring same-gender dates to chapter social events and whether they were asked to be quiet about their sexual orientation during recruitment. Three distinct themes emerged. Some reported a completely supportive environment where they were encouraged to be completely open. On the other extreme was a homophobic environment where they were asked to conceal their sexual orientation. In the middle was a “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” philosophy where there were no explicit restrictions, but there was an expectation of discretion and the issue was rarely discussed publicly. Chapters in the latter two categories were often motivated by a fear of how they would be perceived within the fraternal community (i.e., as the “gay fraternity” or “lesbian sorority”) and how that reputation might hurt their recruitment.

One finding that was consistent across generations was the degree of acceptance of LGB members when they chose to “come out” to fellow chapter members. By an overwhelming majority of almost 90%, the respondents reported that the reaction of their fellow chapter members was supportive. The family-like of fraternal organizations helps

to explain this phenomenon. Regardless of one's personal attitudes toward homosexuality, there is an inclination to attempt to understand and accept one's actual or fraternal brother or sister.

Another consistent finding of both studies were that almost 90% of the respondents were somewhat or very satisfied with their undergraduate fraternity/sorority experience, even those who had to endure a less than welcoming LGB climate.

The research summarized above gives some brief insight into the experiences of LGB fraternity and sorority members. To develop a deeper understanding, it is highly recommended that AFA members read (and acquire for their office library) the following three books that were created by the Lambda 10 Project. Each book contains not only an anthology of personal stories, with a wide variety of perspectives, but each also contains chapters with valuable educational resources. The books were published by Alyson Books and can purchased through the Lambda 10 Project (www.lambda10.org).

Out on Fraternity Row: Personal Accounts of Being Gay in a College Fraternity, Edited by Shane L. Windmeyer & Pamela W. Freeman (1998).

Secret Sisters: Stories of Being Lesbian and Bisexual in a College Sorority, Edited by Shane L. Windmeyer & Pamela W. Freeman (2000).

Brotherhood: Gay Life in College Fraternities, Edited by Shane L. Windmeyer (2005).

Sources:

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Case, D.N., Hesp, G.A., & Eberly, C.G. (2005). An exploratory study of the experiences of gay, lesbian and bisexual fraternity and sorority members revisited. *Oracle: The Research Journal of the Association of Fraternity Advisors*, 1 (1), 24-47 [Download at http://www.fraternityadvisors.org/uploads/PublicDocuments/Oracle_vol1_iss1_Case.pdf]

Rankin, S.R; Case, D.N., Windmeyer S.L., Eberly, C.G; Hesp, G.A., Miller, G. & Molasso, W. (2007). *Experiences of LGBT people in fraternities and sororities: From 1960 to 2007*. Charlotte, NC: Lambda 10 Project. . [Download at <http://www.lambda10.org/gaygreek>]

Savin-Williams, R.C. (2005). *The new gay teenager*. (p. 163). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

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